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C O N F I D E N T I A L TEL AVIV 005324

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KWBG](#) [IS](#) [GOI](#) [INTERNAL](#)

SUBJECT: LIKUD PRIMARIES NOT A FAIT ACCOMPLI

REF: TEL AVIV 5239

Classified By: DCM Gene A. Cretz for Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The August 29 decision by a Likud Party internal "court" has kicked off a process that could result in early party primaries, but -- press reports notwithstanding -- does not compel them to be held. The court decision validates a petition by supporters of Bibi Netanyahu demanding that the party Central Committee meet within 30 days to make a "decision" on the petitioners' specific call for primaries to be held within 60 days of the Central Committee meeting. The 60-day period is specified by the petitioners, not by any Likud rule. Likud leaders have decided to use the Committee's scheduled September 25-26 session to address the issue, which means that any primaries would probably be held about November 25, allowing for the full month of Israeli holidays in October and the need for logistical and campaign preparations. The court decision does not force the Central Committee to actually call primaries, but, under the Likud constitution, all Central Committee "decisions" must be by vote of its some 3,000 members. Were all that to happen, and were Netanyahu successful in securing the dissolution of the government, elections would likely take place 90 days later, about February 24. END SUMMARY.

12. (C) Sharon supporter and Central Committee Chairman Tzachi Hanegbi had spent the past week trying to stave off the petition attempt, which was supported by the required 20 percent of Central Committee members. Sharon supporters say that they will appeal the court decision. Netanyahu supporters are riding high on poll numbers showing Netanyahu defeating Sharon in a two-way race for the party leadership, and are hoping for dissolution of the Knesset in order to force early elections with, they hope, Netanyahu as the new head of Likud. Observers say this is the first time in Israeli political history that a party has sought to oust its own sitting prime minister -- a full year before scheduled elections.

13. (C) Sharon will use the month until the Central Committee session both to rally support for his continued leadership and to prevent having primaries called at all. He will try to demonstrate that his disengagement has been the right course for the country, show that he is not moving ahead on what the right considers further concessions to the Palestinians -- and the U.S. administration -- and, as he has already charged, paint Netanyahu as an unreliable, panicky leader who cannot be entrusted with Israel's future.

14. (C) Although a majority within the Central Committee has opposed disengagement, the decision on whether to hold primaries could go either way. A current internal Central Committee poll shows Sharon and Netanyahu tied with 32 percent each, with right winger Uzi Landau taking an additional 17 percent that he could send Bibi's way in a pinch. Sharon nonetheless is a sitting prime minister, basking in international praise for his disengagement and supported by a majority of Israelis. In addition, he will have just returned from an anticipated "victory lap" in New York. Under his leadership, Likud has control of 40 Knesset seats, a full third of the body, and Sharon has survived challenges from the left and the right to pass a responsible budget and carry out disengagement. No one on the political scene predicts that Likud will be able to retain 40 seats under anyone's leadership, even Sharon's, but the predicted numbers fall quickly in a Netanyahu leadership scenario. In addition, Sharon benefits from the fact that, under Likud party rules, some 17 current Likud parliamentarians, Sharon opponents reportedly among them, are prohibited by internal party rules from seeking reelection. By working against Sharon, they could cut short their terms by nearly a year.

15. (C) Coalition partner Labor will be watching carefully developments up to and including the September Central Committee vote. If Sharon looks to be gaining strength, Labor, itself beset by the leadership aspirations of numerous contenders, could opt to remain in the coalition, even up to the regularly scheduled November 2006 national elections, in the hope of securing more disengagement-type action from Sharon. If Netanyahu appears to be winning, or if Sharon appears to be stonewalling on further steps in the peace process, perhaps to gain right-wing Likud support, Labor could leave the coalition to separate itself from the Likud in time for anticipated early elections.

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